Wallace-McHarg’s Plans for Greater Baltimore

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Abstract

This essay considers the growth of the partnership between David Wallace and Ian McHarg into one of the nation’s dominant urban design and environmental planning firms. It focuses on the firm’s undertaking in the Greater Baltimore region in the 1950’s, 1960’s, and 1970’s. With the benefit of fifty years of hindsight it looks at the successes and failures of their plans for Charles Center, the Green Spring and Worthington Valleys, and the Inner Harbor. Surprisingly, prize-winning innovations praised in one generation came to be judged as the design flaws of the next. Less surprisingly, their plans to “design with nature” sometimes were used by their clients to promote racial and economic segregation.

Keywords: urban design; Baltimore; ecological planning; waterfront development
INTRODUCTION

Mid-century market forces presaged change for the greater Baltimore, Maryland region. Downtown was in precipitous economic decline while the surrounding countryside was prime-ripe for sprawling development. Business leaders undertook to change the developmental destiny. They attracted city planner David A. Wallace and landscape architect Ian McHarg to the region and commissioned them to plan for a better future. This essay considers the Baltimore undertakings of the Wallace-McHarg partnership and then, with the benefit of fifty years of hindsight, looks at the successes and failures of their plans for Charles Center, the Green Spring and Worthington Valleys, and the Inner Harbor.

Late in life both David Wallace and Ian McHarg published their professional memoirs. This essay is based upon their recollections with only an occasional “reality check.” Read side by side, their narratives serve as a reminder that there are two sides to every story. Taken together they shed light on the growth of the Wallace-McHarg partnership into one of the nation’s dominant urban design and environmental planning firms, and cast shadows of doubt as to whether or not the best laid plans always work out for the best.
I. THE PRINCIPALS

David Wallace and Ian McHarg met in 1948 when they were both students at the Harvard School of Design. Wallace was a thirty year old Chicago native who had served five years as a combat engineer during World War II. He had been trained as an architect at the University of Pennsylvania and was attending Harvard on the GI Bill, seeking an advanced degree in City Planning. Harvard awarded Wallace a PhD in 1953. His dissertation concerned the “Residential Segregation of Negroes in Chicago.”

McHarg, a twenty-five year old native of Scotland, was enrolled as an undergraduate at Harvard, notwithstanding the fact that he had never finished his secondary education in Glasgow. He had enlisted in the British Army at seventeen and as a WWII paratrooper had risen through the ranks from Sapper to Major. He was seeking a degree in the new academic field of
Landscape Architecture. Harvard awarded McHarg a bachelor’s degree in 1949 and a master’s
degree in Landscape Architecture in 1950.4

After they had completed their respective Harvard educations Ian McHarg and David
Wallace both sought governmental employment. McHarg returned to Scotland where, after a
one year stay in a tuberculosis hospital, he became—in 1951—a planning officer in Edinburgh.
Meanwhile, in 1953, Wallace became a director of planning for the Philadelphia Redevelopment
Authority. But the public sector could not hold onto these rising stars for long. In 1954 McHarg
was recruited (sans PhD) by the University of Pennsylvania’s Department of City and Regional
Planning to become an assistant professor and to create a Landscape Architecture specialty. In
1957 Wallace was hired by the Greater Baltimore Committee (a private association of significant
“stakeholders” in downtown affairs5) to create a plan for Baltimore’s torpid Central Business
District (CBD).6

II. CHARLES CENTER

David Wallace’s plan for downtown urban renewal was scaled back to include a twenty-two
acre portion of the CBD and subsequently named Charles Center. As planned by Wallace, the
$41.2 million7 project consisted of high rise apartment units, eight new office buildings, a new
hotel, a theatre, a federal building, two plazas with underground parking beneath, a retail
building spanning a major street, and an elevated system of walkways to keep pedestrians off the
streets. It also incorporated an existing hotel and four existing office buildings.8
The Urban Land Institute praised the “ingenuity and sophistication of its plan, and the clarity of its message in urban design.” The architectural style reflected the “less is more” philosophy of the day. The champion, Mies van der Rohe, was selected to design One Charles Center, a twenty-two story office building that served as the center piece. A Center Plaza was created by closing off a busy city street and creating a “super block”; it was paved in granite and kept open and uncluttered by commercial concessions. The skywalks protected pedestrians from traffic and provided prime retail space on a second level. The cantilevering of a building across a major...
thoroughfare optimized use of the valuable air space and city taxes. Jane Jacobs touted Charles Center as “A New Heart for Downtown.”12


III. PLAN FOR THE VALLEYS

In 1961 with the Charles Center project well on its way to completion, David Wallace joined his former Harvard collegemate Ian McHarg when he accepted a tenured full professorship in the University of Pennsylvania’s Department of City and Regional Planning. But both planners had ambition beyond the academy. McHarg created a lecture series on “Man and Environment,” which “once included 14 Nobel prizewinners in a single semester.”13 The course morphed into a
nationally syndicated television series with McHarg serving as the writer and the on-camera host.\textsuperscript{14}

Meanwhile, Wallace remained on the lookout for part-time practice opportunities as an urban design consultant. In 1962 he was contacted by a private group of Baltimore County’s “landed-gentry” who found their estates at risk from suburban sprawl. They commissioned him to prepare a seventy square mile plan for Greenspring and Worthington Valleys. Recognizing that the plan would in large measure be one of landscape architecture, Wallace asked McHarg to join him. Together they formed the partnership of Wallace-McHarg, Architects, Landscape Architects and Environmental Planners, and took on the task of producing a \textit{Plan for the Valleys}.\textsuperscript{15}

Completion of the Jones Fall Expressway and Interstate Highway I 83 would bring the bucolic Green Spring and Worthington Valleys within a twenty minute drive from downtown Baltimore. If provided with water and sewer service, these 70,000 acres would be threatened with uncontrolled development and despoliation. McHarg was to be the “green-fingered planner” who would use the principles of ecology in making choices as to where and how limited development might go forward. Wallace was to undertake the task of the “brown-fingered planner” in “manipulating money, legislation, power, and urban planning” so as to prevent despoliation.16

McHarg created an “ecological planning method” to explore the physical and biological processes that shape the landscape. Each layer of information was expressed in maps and “superimposed on top of the previous one.”17 The overlayed ecological inventory identified land that was intrinsically unsuited for development (wetlands or steep slopes, for example), and/or land where development had to be severely constrained to allow for natural processes (run off, aquifer recharge, and the like).
From this base, Wallace identified land where sensible development could proceed without despoiling the environment. Wallace’s task was then to convince the public planners not to extend major interceptor sewers or expressway access onto the valley floors and to redirect development to the wooded hillsides where single family houses on large lots could safely be served with wells and septic systems. Public water mains and sewerage interceptors would be directed to several of the valleys’ major promontories. Wallace convinced the county government to permit the creation of village centers where affordable houses could be built at...
high density and with a varied mix of housing units, thereby accommodating an economically and racially diverse population.¹⁹


The resulting *Plan for the Valleys* became the template for planning growth based upon ecological principles.
Ian McHarg used it as the centerpiece in his 1969 book *Design with Nature*. The book was lauded by urbanist Lewis Mumford and short-listed for the National Book Award. McHarg became a spokesman for the environmental movement with prime-time TV appearances and profiles in *Life Magazine*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New Yorker*.20

IV. INNER HARBOR MASTER PLAN

The next Baltimore job for the Wallace-McHarg firm was the development of a master plan for the decrepit harbor. Its 1964 *Inner Harbor Master Plan*21 embraced the Maryland Transportation Department’s controversial decision to bridge the harbor basin with an interstate expressway.

The Wallace-McHarg plan called for redevelopment of the waterfront with a continuous cornice line of residential towers on piers framing the open water. With the exception of one major vertical lynch pin tower, and an I.M. Pei designed World Trade Center at the water’s edge, the business district would not be permitted to encroach from the north. The shoreline would be
left open for passive recreational use. Ships and boats of all shapes and sizes, including the historic U.S.F. Constellation, would serve as the attractions.  


V. WALLACE, MCHARG, ROGERS, AND TODD

In the course of the Baltimore work the Wallace-McHarg firm was expanded to include William H. Rogers and Thomas A. Todd as partners (WMRT). WMRT’s Baltimore work provided it with a national reputation as “downtown planning and urban design experts.” Business boomed. Its 1966 Lower Manhattan Plan was followed with downtown plans for Buffalo (1968), Los Angeles (1970), New Orleans (1973), and Miami (1974).

McHarg was not much involved in downtown planning, but his reputation born of Design with Nature designated WMRT as the nation’s leading environmental planning firm. In 1972 it was commissioned to prepare a plan for the study of the Chesapeake Bay, and that same year it was selected to prepare environmental impact assessments for the soon to be constructed Washington subway system. In 1973 McHarg applied his ecological inventory method while
assisting the Denver authorities with a smog-conscious regional transportation plan. Later that year McHarg and Wallace worked together to utilize environmental information in the preparation of a San Francisco Bay Plan. In 1978 WMRT went international and designed the new capital of Nigeria. McHarg coordinated the ecological analysis for site selection and planning.

While WMRT thrived, the professional relationship between David Wallace and Ian McHarg deteriorated. Perhaps their falling out was inevitable. Although they had started out as faculty colleagues and social friends, they had starkly different personalities. From Wallace’s point of view McHarg was “bombastic,” but a better description might be “ebullient.” McHarg was the cherished oldest son in a happy family; he loved the spotlight as a ballroom dancer, a television personality, and a public intellectual. When his beloved first wife died prematurely he mourned her properly and married an also beloved second wife. He doted on his four children. Design with Nature made him rich. He received many prizes including the prestigious Japan Prize in City Planning and the U.S. National Medal of Art. He was “[b]rilliant, poetic, funny, irrepresible and sometimes abrasive . . .” McHarg’s memoirs depict a joyful life.
David Wallace was altogether different. Married and childless with one stepson, Wallace was a consummately private person. He was by his own description “portly, phlegmatic, and . . . authoritarian” who was by his very nature a naysayer.31
And he had a litany of complaints directed at McHarg. McHarg was “arrogant” and “domineering” and “[n]ot an easy man to be a partner with . . .” McHarg was fast and loose with his facts; for example, in the storied *Plan for the Valleys* McHarg had asserted without proof that “pollution of the underground water in the valleys would affect Baltimore’s water supply.” Moreover, McHarg’s environmental inventory process had become obsolescent; his beautiful overlay maps failed to embrace the new computerized Geographical Information System (GIS) and were little used. Wallace’s memoirs depict a life of successes, but one tempered by hard-feelings, recrimination, and regret.

McHarg’s depiction of Wallace was more generous if a trifle patronizing. He recognized Wallace as “indisputably, the dominant city planner in the United States.” And he acknowledged that too often as a result of his celebrity, he, McHarg, “receive[d] the bulk of public attention and approbation” for Wallace’s accomplishments. Perhaps Wallace was envious.

In 1979 Ian McHarg was “requested” to leave the WMRT partnership. The precipitating cause was a contract between the firm and the government of Iran. McHarg had negotiated an agreement with the Shah of Iran whereby WMRT would design and construct a 721-acre Persian Garden on the outskirts of Tehran. The park was to replicate the world’s major environments and include an aquarium, a zoo, and museums. The $1.8 billion budget was perhaps the largest commission ever awarded to a landscape architectural firm. When the Iranian Revolution struck in 1978 and the Shah fled the country, WMRT was left with $300,000 worth of outstanding invoices. The revolutionary government refused to pay.
There are two sides to the story. According to Wallace, McHarg—as the original partner in charge—had agreed to take any losses but then refused to honor his promise. According to McHarg, there was no such agreement, and his partners—after confiscating the full $125,000 in his capital account—locked him out of his office. WMRT became WRT (Wallace, Roberts and Todd). A decade later the International Court at the Hague ordered restitution.

VI. A FIFTY YEAR RETROSPECTIVE

Fifty years have passed since David Wallace began his work in Baltimore. Now is the time to take a retrospective look at the successes and failures of the WMRT plans for the region. In 1994 Edward Gunts, the Baltimore Sun architecture critic queried, “Charles Center: Is It Dead?” Naysayers considered the Mies van der Rohe-designed center piece to be a “knock-off”
of his Seagram Building in Manhattan. Its tenants, CSX Corporation and Amoco Oil Co., had moved their headquarters out of town, and the mortgage on the tower was foreclosed. Throughout the Center retail spaces were empty. Escalators were out of order and the skywalks unused. Homeless people were camped out on the subway vents.\textsuperscript{41}

No one can fault David Wallace for the overall decline of downtown Baltimore in the 1960’s, 70’s, and 80’s. Renewal of twenty-two downtown acres cannot be expected to combat the urban realities of poverty, civil disturbances, failing schools, a disappearing tax base, a high rate of crime, and drug addiction among 750,000 residents. But remarkably it was the prize-winning features of the original Plan that were blamed for Charles Center’s shortcomings.

The critics do not laud Charles Center as “one of urban America’s crowning achievements.”\textsuperscript{42} They regretted that vibrant city streets had been replaced with a “barren, windswept plaza . . . .”\textsuperscript{43} The “less is more’ was . . . never enough . . . .”\textsuperscript{44} And by 2007 the “more” was being retrofitted. The plaza was redesigned with retail concessions, “greenscaping, a reflecting pool, movable seating and dynamic lighting effects.”\textsuperscript{45}

The skywalks in the original 1959 design had taken life off of the city streets and cast shadows on the plazas below. Private building owners found themselves saddled with the costs of maintenance and security. The promise of a second level retail never materialized, as pedestrians preferred to stay at the street level. At the behest of building owners sections were torn down and today little remains.\textsuperscript{46}

One part of the skywalk system had permitted a major retailer to place its building as a bridge across the street dividing the north and south sections of Charles Center. The store thereby received what appeared to be a prime location, and the city received taxes on the air rights. Thirty years later the store was out of business and the building was a poorly maintained
eyesore. It had come to be seen as a visual barrier between the east and west side of town and blamed for turning the underlying street into an “oppressive” tunnel. The bridge (and the building) was taken down in the 1990’s.47

But in the final analysis the overall impact of Charles Center must be scored as a success. By 2008 Baltimore Sun’s architecture critic Edward Gunts proclaimed “Charles Center’s role in the city’s rebirth [to be] undeniable.”48 It had “offered a bold vision for the heart of Baltimore . . . “49 “Charles Center was [the] catalyst for revival of [the] City’s downtown.”50

Wallace-McHarg’s Plan for the Valleys might be counted as both a success and a failure. It convinced the local government not to extend water or sewer service onto the green floors of Worthington and Greenspring Valleys, and it persuaded the highway planners not to connect the valleys to the interstate system with a highway spur. As a result the seventy-five square mile valley area was protected from sprawling development.51 Only a limited number of multi-million dollar houses were built on large lots on the wooded hillsides with individual septic systems. McHarg was happy that the natural landscape had been protected from major environmental degradation, and the “landed-gentry” who had commissioned the plan were pleased by the conservation of their estates and their community.52

But David Wallace was his own best critic when it came to the failures of the Plan for the Valleys:

While the valleys themselves were saved from despoliation, the plateaus have never been sewerced as we proposed. As a consequence . . . [t]he relatively high densities and varied mix of housing units matching a metropolitan cross-section of ethnic and income groups that we proposed never materialized.53

In Wallace’s own words the plan in effect was an “elitist conspiracy among the rich white landowners and the government they controlled to provided de facto segregation.”54
In an ironic twist David Wallace, who throughout his career had rhetorically advanced the cause of racial and economic desegregation, found himself in practice master-minding the use of environmental protection as an excuse for the exclusion of low and moderate-income residents. Wallace answered that his plan “was not completely carried out.” It was not his fault.


By any measure Baltimore’s Inner Harbor renewal has proven to be an aesthetic and economic success. In 1970 aesthetic disaster was averted when the Maryland Department of Transportation was convinced to change its plans and not to bridge a sixteen lane interstate highway interchange over the water of the inner basin. In 1977 economic success was assured when James Rouse built a 150,000 square foot festival marketplace at the water’s edge.
Harborplace, along with the National Aquarium and the Maryland Science Center and prestigious shops, were soon attracting seventeen million visitors a year and producing $167,000,000 in gross revenue from Harbor attractions.\textsuperscript{58}

Wallace was quick to claim credit for WMRT for the Inner Harbor’s success. But doubts persist. The crucial first step was the elimination of the Maryland Department of Transportation’s plan to bridge an interstate expressway across the throat of the Inner Harbor. Although Ian McHarg with typical bravado claimed credit for having re-routed the traffic by personally interceding with President Johnson’s wife, his story seems fanciful. More likely the bridge was eliminated by grassroots-up demands from the people, rather than from top-down pressures from Lady Bird.\textsuperscript{59}

The crucial second step was the creation of activity at the water’s edge. WMRT’s 1964 Inner Harbor Master Plan opted for the waterfront to be used for open recreation and small commercial activities. The proposed housing that was to have been constructed on piers along the shore was never built. WMRT’s planned promenades, walkways, and bridges were put in place but it was developers, builders, and bankers who filled the open space with Harbor Place, a National Aquarium, Maryland Science Center, a rejuvenated Power Plant, and up-market offices, hotels, and retailers. At a 2000 reunion where the players in the Inner Harbor story celebrated its success Wallace was chastened to find WMRT’s contribution unmentioned.\textsuperscript{60}

**CONCLUSION**

Let the planner beware! The prize-winning innovations of one generation may be judged the design flaws of the next. Planners intent on accomplishing socially desirable goals must choose
their clients carefully. Builders—not planners—take most of the credit for successful developments.

**AFTERWORD**

Ian McHarg died on March 5, 2001 in West Chester, Pennsylvania at age eighty from pulmonary disease. David Wallace died in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on July 19, 2004 at age eighty-six in a joint suicide with his wife. Both were terminally ill.

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**Notes**

1 A version of this essay was presented as a paper at the Society for American City and Regional Planning History Conference in Oakland, California, October 14–18, 2009.
9 Ibid., p. 9.
13 Franklin, Obituary of Ian McHarg.
14 Ibid.
17 Franklin, Obituary of Ian McHarg.
19 Ibid., pp. 87–93.
22 Ibid., pp. 115–34.
23 Ibid., pp. x–xii.
24 Ibid., p. 179.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., pp. 184–87.
29 McHarg, *A Quest for Life*.
30 Franklin, Obituary of Ian McHarg.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., p. 84.
34 Ibid., pp. 186–88.
36 Ibid., p. 217.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
52 Ibid., pp. 77, 246–47.
53 Ibid., pp. 246–47.
54 Ibid., p. 247.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., pp. 120–21.
57 Ibid., pp. 134–36.
59 McHarg, A Quest for Life, pp. 180–83; Wallace, Urban Planning/My Way, p. 120.